Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.172/7/Add.4
22 April 1994

Original: ENGLISH

Item 10 (a) of the provisional agenda*

NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Technical session

Addendum

Women: their vulnerability and strengths in the face of disaster

Summary of presentation by Ms. Rokeya Kabir, Executive Director, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha

1. The presentation looks at the vulnerability and strengths of Bangladeshi women in the face of disaster, especially the recurring cyclone hazard. Cyclones are inevitable in Bangladesh owing to its geographic and climatic characteristics. The extent of poverty, ill health, and overcrowding throughout the country makes most of the population extremely vulnerable to such disasters. The poor health and nutritional status of children and their mothers places these groups especially at risk. This overall vulnerability is exacerbated by lack of educational opportunities and by widespread cultural, social and economic discrimination against women.

2. When cyclones hit, women are further disadvantaged by social custom and purdah which can make it hard for them to take refuge in communal shelters. When shelters are far away, women, children, the sick and the elderly have trouble reaching them as they are physically weaker and women in addition are responsible for taking care of the children. In the aftermath of a cyclone, the presence of human and animal corpses, lack of clean drinking water and latrines and overcrowded conditions in shelters all lead to outbreaks of disease. These epidemics usually account for more deaths than the cyclone itself. Children and women succumb first due to their poor health and nutritional status.

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* A/CONF.172/1

3. Bangladeshi women, however, are not helpless victims, as so often portrayed. They are able to substantially reduce their vulnerability and that of their children through their own strength, courage and determination. Using their ingenuity, they manage to survive and, when allowed to, have a major role to play in the planning and implementation of recovery and rehabilitation programmes. Their contribution to household income frequently keeps the family alive.

4. Because of women's participation, health programmes, such as oral rehydration therapy and the expanded programme of immunization and special measles vaccination campaigns, are able to minimize infant and child mortality in the wake of a cyclone. Solidarity among women and community support in general are also key factors in reducing vulnerability.

5. The objective of examining the special vulnerability of women and children and the crucial role that women can, and do, play in reducing that vulnerability, is that future development programmes will not only incorporate disaster management measures as a fundamental element but also recognize and enhance women's special strengths. In this way, the empowerment of women so as to enable them to fully develop their potential will become an integral part of disaster preparedness and mitigation. This will help to further reduce the unnecessary suffering and death of children as a result of natural disasters.